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ENGL 123

**COLOR SYMBOLISM**

The world is filled with many colors. Similar to sensations and emotions, colors can symbolize different things. People around the world have different meanings of colors based on tradition, culture, and religion. For example the “color white is considered a sad color in Asia, but in the western world it is a color of purity and life” (Ken Roher). Even though colors have different meanings around the world, colors are very symbolic in stories because they emphasize the importance of certain events and affect the overall personalities of the main characters. The reader improves his understanding of the story by gaining knowledge of color representation.

Colors frequently emphasize the importance of certain events throughout the story by describing the situation at hand. In The Ugliest Pilgrim by Dorothy Betts, the main character’s name is Violet. The color violet has several meanings, such as “being the color of spiritual fulfillment, magic, and royalty” (Roher). Violet’s mission in this story is to visit a preacher in Tulsa who presents himself on television as a magical healer. Violet seeks spiritual fulfillment to cure herself from ugliness. Although she thanks God for almost everything along her journey, her faith in God is not genuine. Violet puts her trust in a preacher in order for him to transform her into a beautiful person. Her name explains the reason she searches for spiritual fulfillment in a magical royalty. By knowing that this story is based around a color, a reader can make accurate assumptions about the events to follow.

Similar to The Ugliest Pilgrim, Ernest Hemingway’s story Hills like White Elephants is also structured around color symbolism. However, the important color in this story is “white”. As introduced earlier, the color white can represent purity and life, but it can also signify “innocence, youth, godliness, cleanliness, and health professionals” (Roher). In this story a young girl by the name of Jig discusses with a man on whether or not she should have an abortion. This story takes place in 1927 during an era where sex before marriage was far from godliness and was frowned upon. This gives the reader insight into why Jig was considering having an abortion. As Jig and the man are talking at the bus station about her going to see a health professional to get this operation done, the young girl states that “the hills look like white elephants” (149). The whiteness Jig sees in the hills symbolizes her lost innocence as a result of her baring a child. The girl’s body is no longer pure, but it is filled with potential life. The white elephants are also seen as expensive animals to own. Similar to a white elephant, the child Jig is caring in her uterus will also be expensive. By fully understanding the main color within this story, one can sympathize with the situation at hand.

Another story that shows how colors emphasize the importance of certain events throughout a story is The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The color yellow has many conflicting meanings. On one hand the color “yellow represents sunshine, happiness, hope and peace while on the other hand it can characterize hazard signs, emergency, danger and death” (Roher). The color yellow is also believed to “signify through imagery that not everything is as it seems” (Roher). The main character in this story has been diagnosed by her husband Dr. John of having temporary nervous depression. Together they move into a large home where she is told to sleep in a room with yellow wallpaper. At the beginning of the story, the yellow wallpaper is very ugly and disturbing to the main character. However, as the story progresses, she finds meaning behind the wallpaper. She believes that there is a woman behind the wallpaper trying to escape. The main character sees this yellow wallpaper as a sign of emergency and it is up to her to save the woman from danger and death. The main character will not be at peace until the other woman is safe. Some people might argue that the wallpaper is like any other ordinary wallpaper and that the main character is only imagining this woman behind it. Nevertheless, the color yellow in this story helps explain the importance of certain events in an odd situation.

Colors not only emphasize the importance of certain events in a story, but colors can also influence the overall personalities of the main characters. In The Ugliest Pilgrim Violet’s personality is described as courageous, spiritual, and in need to create perfection in her life. Violet is a woman riding a bus across the country by herself to see someone that she has only seen on television. This clearly shows that Violet is brave and that she is not afraid of the people and events she may become involved with along her journey. Violet’s quest is centered on her wish to create perfection in her life. She states, “I’d almost ask them in Tulsa to make me a man if I could have hair like his” (6). This shows Violet’s desperation to be transformed into something other than who she is in order to fulfill her wish of perfection. Violet is not satisfied with the body that surrounds her inner beauty and as she travels across the country she constantly compares herself with others. Violet’s personality was strongly influenced by the meaning behind the color within her name.

The effect color has on the main character’s personalities is also expressed in Hills Like White Elephants. The main character Jig is conveyed as a young innocent girl. She orders an alcoholic beverage, but does not know what it is or how it tastes. This makes the reader assume that Jig has never drank alcohol before which should not be done by a young child. As Jig takes a sip of the alcoholic beverage, she states “It tastes like licorice” (150). Jig’s comparison of alcohol with candy is another example of her youthfulness and innocence which also describes the color white. Alcohol is usually not described as tasting like candy; however, to a young girl the alcohol gives her the same sensation she gets when she eats candy. Jig’s personality is a great representation of color symbolism.

The influence color has on the main character’s traits is also described in The Yellow Wallpaper. In this story the main character is very creative and hopeful. She imagines a woman behind the wall that only she could see. The woman she see’s behind the yellow wallpaper is symbolic of herself and her husband. The desperate woman is trying to free herself from the wallpaper as John’s wife is trying to free herself from her controlled life and marriage. If John’s wife finds a way to help the woman escape from the wallpaper she will gain a sense of hope that she too can escape from her marriage. John doesn’t want his wife to think for herself, work, or even write. His wife states, “I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition” (17). John has brainwashed his wife into thinking that he is only helping her when in fact he is keeping her captive. The colors that surrounded both John’s wife and Jig affected their personalities and how their characters were portrayed.

All people are affected by their surroundings which is often used to explain why people act the way they do and do the things they do. Colors are everywhere, but are often overlooked. Although people around the world have different meanings behind colors, they are very symbolic in stories for two main reasons. First, colors emphasize the importance of certain events inside a story**.** Secondly, colors affect the overall personalities of the main characters. Events within a story and the main characters personalities can be explained by the colors in the setting and the title. The Ugliest Pilgrim, The Yellow Wallpaper, and Hills Like White Elephants all highlight color symbolism. Colors do in fact have different meanings around the globe, but this opens up the reader’s imagination to discover the significance of events and character traits within the story.

Work’s Cited

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